

Finding Female Ancestors

Tips & Tricks to Find Those Elusive Women

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Why is it hard to search for female ancestors, especially prior to the 20th century? To be honest, at least in the United States, women were “chattel” or property up until about 1920. Also keep in mind, then when most historical documents were created, the focus was on the MALE not the FEMALE. And property? Always listed under a man’s name unless the female was a widow or an “independent woman.”

And history did not treat this “independent women” well. Look back to the Salem Witch Trials and you will see a pattern of “fear” of women who had money and were not hampered by a male influence. It was not a pretty world in terms of business for women ... men owned and operated most businesses. And whose surname was always carried forward? The man’s surname. So, you see what we are up against?

Female Ancestors: Research Strategy

Once you get deep into genealogy you soon realize it has been a cruel world for women. And since the focus, when it came to records, was on the male or husband, the female was relegated to sub-ordinate status.

- **Start with the husband.** Start with records listing the female ancestor’s husband as well as her brothers and her father. Marriage and baptism records may list your female ancestor as a witness.
- **Do You Have the Correct Name?** Make sure you have the correct name information. Keep a “name variation” list and enter different naming patterns. And don’t forget nicknames!
- **Check the Middle Name.** In many instances, the middle name for a child is a maiden surname ... the wife wants to keep the surname “alive” from her mother or her mother’s mother.
- **What are the naming traditions?** Look for naming patterns going back several generations. See if surnames were used as maiden names, or the first female was named after the mother’s mother.
- **Make a timeline.** It is much easier to see “gaps” in records if you plot out your finds in a timeline. Also map out the path to naturalization for a woman.
- **Browse a variety of records.** Few record sets focus on just females, but for the most part you are left to creating a female ancestor strategy when searching for records.
- **Who’s talking?** For information, family members sought the help of women, not men, in the family. Interview your older female ancestors to preserve their stories ASAP!

- **F.A.N. Club Records.** Check the Friends, Associates, and Neighbors for your female ancestor and understand the social and volunteer circles to which she belonged.
- **Personal Records.** Women tended to write more letters and were more apt to keep a diary or journal. Locating these items could give you a better understanding of how your female ancestor lived.

Best Records for Finding Female Ancestors

- Birth, marriage, and death records
- Cemetery records
- Probate records and wills
- Church records
- Newspapers
- Census records
- Military pensions and service records
- Land records
- Passenger lists/naturalization records

Resource List

- **The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy**
<https://amzn.to/3elyytT>